

A Very Creative Idea Can Also Degenerate

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When an idea degenerates into a slogan the consequences can be disastrous. Something similar has happened or is happening to a very creative idea: using our folk and traditional theatre forms in contemporary theatre. This has happened for a variety of reasons. The primary reason is the obsession of some of our directors, not excluding the very creative and talented ones, with form at the cost of content. That form and content in any work of art are not separate entities needs hardly to be stated but in the present context it needs not only to be stated but stated with stress.

If we take a brief look at some of the plays which have used traditional or folk forms two conclusions emerge clearly. In all those plays where the playwrights have been able to achieve a complete fusion between form and content the results have been very satisfying; whenever the form has been imposed on a particular play the result has been disastrous. Whereas in the second category there have been umpteen plays, one can recall only a few in the former category. *Ghashiram Kotwal*, *Hayavadan*, *Sattavara Neralu*, *Jasma Odan*, *Madhyama Vyayoga* (K. N. Panikkar's production) are some of the plays where the author/director has succeeded in the use of traditional/folk forms.

To elaborate I refer to two productions of Karanth. Both were very competently staged. In one the form and content so jelled that one was not even aware of the form and the total experience was very gratifying. This was *Sattavara Neralu*. But, in the other, one was watching a form and constantly being reminded that the play was only a vehicle for conveying the form. A very topsy-turvy situation. Like the oft-quoted line from the opening scene of the same play: "... when the battle's lost and won". That was *Barnam Van*.

K. N. Panikkar's *Madhyama Vyayoga*, one of his early attempts to reinterpret a traditional story through traditional means, was an excellent production. Perhaps the country discovered Panikkar

through that production. After that there has been a spate of productions by him in more or less the same form but one is getting increasingly uneasy about his later work. The reason is simple and mentioned earlier. His obsession with form has become so compulsive that his work has started losing the clarity and precision which one associated with *Madhyama Vyayoea*.

There is an aspect to the use of traditional forms which very few directors really are aware of. Most of these forms are simply not capable of expressing facts of complex contemporary reality or, to put it another way, they can express straightforward, elemental, unambiguous stories, but when it comes to expressing the ambiguous and complex reality of modern life they somehow fail. They fail not because there is anything wrong with them but because originally they were really not designed to express such reality. It is only in the hands of a very creative playwright who can mould and adapt these forms to say what he wants to say that they yield a rich theatrical experience.

A glance at the National Festival of plays using folk/traditional forms (Natya Samaroh '84) organised by Sangeet Natak Akademi can be very edifying in this context. One need not talk about the half-baked productions but even those which were competently mounted raised many questions as to their avowed purpose. Take Bhanu Bharti's *Pashu Gayatri* which had the vigour of a folk play but remained at the folkish level without really adding any contemporary dimension to the total experience. Or for that matter Ratan Thiyam's *Chakravyuha* which was applauded the most. It was competently staged, was aesthetically very satisfying, and had the touch of a professional job very well done. But whether it gave any contemporary interpretation to the Mahabharata story is a question which I am not competent to answer because I am completely ignorant of the language of the play. Even if it did, a question still remains: Will it be correct to say that only stories from our mythology can best be expressed through our traditional forms? For that matter they can be expressed perhaps only in the traditional forms.

Two other plays in the Festival had two different lessons to teach. Thapliyal's *Harishchanner ki Larai* used the format of traditional Nautanki but the content was so commonplace that one wondered whether it was only this kind of simplistic theme that could be conveyed through a folk form. *Ghasiram Kotwal* which was staged in the North Zone Festival at Lucknow and which could not make it to Delhi had another lesson to teach. It was produced not in the form in which it was written but in Nautanki form. The experience did hurt one's sensibilities, because a very rich and complex play

was reduced to the level of crude Nautanki. The lesson is obvious: Not only can you not impose a form on a play, you also run a great risk if you transplant a totally alien form on a play which has been well realized in another form.

When the use of traditional and folk forms is argued, the stock phrase used is 'discovery of roots' or 'going to the soil'. True, but are all roots ancient? There can be modern roots too, which one has to discover to deal with contemporary reality and experience.

I firmly believe that there is much in our folk and traditional forms which can be of immense use to urban theatre workers. Playwrights, directors and actors can adopt and adapt with profit some of the techniques and conventions of these forms but this adoption must not be for the sake of adoption; it must be in tune with their temperaments, their creative needs, and the inherent demands of the specific work they have undertaken.

In this respect the only thing that is needed is provision of enough opportunities to theatre workers for exposure to traditional forms. The ultimate assimilation and dissemination should be left to their own creative needs. It is very hazardous to tell an artist to create this way and not that way. □